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## Understanding the Bombay textile strike of 1982-1983

*Ravi Ghadge*

The last two decades of the twentieth century saw a renewed interest in labour studies and social history in India. This was largely due to the dramatic transformations in the social worlds of Indian labour as a result of deindustrialization, characterized by a decline in traditional factories and increasing informalization and casualization of labour in the old industrial centers of India such as Bombay, Ahmedabad, and Kanpur.<sup>1</sup> The dismantling of old industrial sites and the subsequent disintegration of working-class communities have bolstered elitist visions of the restructuring of these industrial cities, further intensifying social conflicts in these regions. In this context of a “vanishing history,” recent studies have focused on recovering the “lost worlds” of Indian labour by giving voice to workers’ past and contemporary struggles to preserve their culture and identity.”<sup>2</sup> This paper takes a small step in that direction by understanding the predicament of textile workers in Bombay through their narratives of a strike that changed their lives dramatically.

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<sup>1</sup> For more details see MAHAPATRA, Prabhu. *Situating the Renewal: Reflections on Labour Studies in India*. Noida: V. V. Giri National Labour Institute, 1998; JOSHI, Chitra. “On ‘Deindustrialization’ and the Crisis of Male Identities”. *International Review of Social History*. Vol. 47, 2002, pp. 159-175.

<sup>2</sup> See JOSHI, Chitra. *Lost Worlds: Indian Labour and its Forgotten Histories*. New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003; ADARKAR, Neera and MENON, Meena. *One Hundred Years, One Hundred Voices: The Mill Workers of Mumbai*. Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2004.

### Background of the Bombay Textile Strike of 1982-83

More than three decades have passed since the 1982-1983 Bombay textile strike (henceforth, the strike).<sup>3</sup> Although the strike had a far-reaching impact on Indian labour, it has not received the attention it deserves. It was one of the longest strikes in India's working class history and possibly the most decisive in terms of its impact on the textile industry and workers in Bombay. The enormity of the strike can be seen by the number of workers who participated in it (almost 200,000) and by their collective effort to stay out of the mills for more than eighteen months. It is estimated that prior to the strike there were about 232,000 workers employed in the industry. The failure of the strike led to a massive retrenchment of workers. Almost 106,000 workers lost their jobs. It is perhaps the biggest job loss in the history of modern industry in India.<sup>4</sup> It is believed that most of these workers joined the ranks of the "new poor" in the unorganized industry, working as casual labourers or in the decentralized power loom sector.<sup>5</sup>

The literature on the strike is scarce. There have been two in-depth studies on the strike.<sup>6</sup> Both provide an elaborate account of the immediate context of the strike. There is research that deals with specific dimensions of the strike such as, leadership, technology, and alternative interpretations of the strike.<sup>7</sup> However, there is no single sociological study on the strike that situates it within the broader social history of working-class formation in Bombay or which assesses broader implications of the strike from the workers' perspective.

Based on the analysis of oral testimonies of sixteen respondents associated with the textile mills in Bombay, this paper adds to the existing literature in

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<sup>3</sup> Bombay was officially renamed Mumbai in 1995 by the right wing Hindu supremacist Shiv Sena-led government. In the paper, I alternatively use Bombay or Mumbai based on the specific historical period discussed.

<sup>4</sup> SANGHATANA, Lokshahi Hakk. *Murder of the Mills: An Enquiry into Bombay's Textile Industry and its Workers*. Mumbai, 1996.

<sup>5</sup> The Indian labour market is classified into the organized (formal) and the unorganized (informal) based on the size of the establishment, the legal benefits that are provided to the workers, and their ability to organize into unions. However, in practice it is difficult to sustain the distinction between the formal and informal sector.

<sup>6</sup> BAKSHI, Rajni. *The Long Haul: The Bombay Textile Workers Strike of 1982-83*. Bombay: Build Documentation Center, 1986; VAN WERSCH, Hubert. *The Bombay Textile Strike 1982-83*. Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1992.

<sup>7</sup> On the question of strike leadership see PENDSE, Sandip. "The Datta Samant Phenomenon-I". *Economic and Political Weekly*. 16, 16, 1981, pp. 685-697; PENDSE, Sandeep. "The Datta Samant Phenomenon-II". *Economic and Political Weekly*. 16, 17, 1981, pp. 745-749. On the issue of technology, see DUTTA, R. C. "New Technology and Textile Workers". *Economic and Political Weekly*. 34, 39, 1999. For an alternative interpretation of the strike, see TULPULE, Bagaram. "Bombay Textile Workers' Strike: A Different View". *Economic and Political Weekly*. 17, 9, 1982, pp. 17-18.

several ways: first, it provides an interpretive analysis of the strike from the workers' perspective. Second, against the tendency of studying the strike only as an event based on its immediate socio-economic exigencies, the paper historicizes the strike within the broader process of working-class formation in Bombay. Finally, the paper discusses the broader implications of the strike on the working-class community in Bombay and the subsequent economic restructuring of the city.

The paper is organized into three sections. The first section—Bombay and the Social Worlds of the Textile Workers—historicizes the strike, taking into account the process of working-class formation in the city. The second section—Exigencies on the Eve of the strike—discusses the immediate socio-economic context of the strike. These two sections provide the historical context to understand the oral testimonies of workers that come later. The third section—Workers' Perceptions of the Strike—is based on the analysis of interviews of workers and residents of the mill district and discusses their views on the strike. It provides an opportunity to subjectively understand the *meanings* produced by those who were affected by the strike in addition to the numbers.

### **Bombay and the Social Worlds of the Textile Workers**

By the end of the nineteenth century, Bombay had established itself as an important commercial center in India. According to Chandavarkar, an eminent historian of Bombay, the city “handled about two-fifths of the total value of India’s foreign trade, 70 per cent of the value of the coastal trade and the bulk of the re-export trade to the Persian Gulf and to the Arab and East African ports”.<sup>8</sup> Bombay was essentially a late-seventeenth century extension of the East India Company’s (the company that was given exclusive trading rights over India under the British crown) trade with Gujarat (a state north of Bombay). There were three stages of the growth of Bombay. The first stage (mid eighteenth century) characterized the establishment of the British naval-commercial domination of the west coast of India. The second stage (early nineteenth century) was associated with the political domination and the establishment of the Bombay presidency. The third stage was the phase of industrial domination. Following the industrial revolution in England, India had become an exporter of raw

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<sup>8</sup> CHANDAVARKAR, Rajnarayan. *The Origins of Industrial Capitalism in India: Business Strategies and the Working Classes in Bombay, 1900-1940*. Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 1994, p. 25.

cotton and a market for imported mill-made cotton. This enabled the indigenous entrepreneurs of Bombay to set up their own cotton mills utilizing cheap labour from the coastal regions in the western part of India.<sup>9</sup>

Although Bombay has widely been understood as a “colonial port city,” some scholars are not comfortable with this category. Chandavarkar argues, “even though Bombay was in part a product of its imperial connection and owes its origin and early growth to the colonial settlement, its commercial and industrial development was shaped increasingly and in important ways by its place within the internal economy.”<sup>10</sup> Within this internal economy, the commodity markets were linked to wider relations of production and exchange in the hinterland. Therefore, textile mills of Bombay were increasingly dependent on the domestic market. Therefore, Bombay was not solely a product of colonialism, but its growth could be attributed to an interaction of global and regional/local processes.

The labour for the new mills in Bombay was recruited from migrants from the adjoining rural hinterland. Despite years of working in the city, these migrants maintained close ties with their original villages and through their cash remittances contributed to the reproduction of the rural economy. These rural links were vital for the workers’ social reproduction in the city and in their labour struggles, as we shall see later in the context of the strike.

The development of the mills from the mid-nineteenth century onwards engendered a unique working-class culture, giving rise to a distinct social and physical space in the central parts of the city, which came to be known as Girangaon or the “village of mills.” The workers who came to work in the mills were largely male rural migrants from the adjoining regions of Konkan on the west coast (mainly Ratnagiri) and the Deccan Ghat or plateau region in central India (mainly Pune, Satara, Sangli, and Nashik).<sup>11</sup> Also, those who migrated were not landless rural poor, but essentially small landowners who saw migration as an opportunity to earn “quick money” to strengthen their rural power base.

To meet their material needs of employment, credit, and housing in the city, the workers had to rely on social networks of caste, region, and kinship. This further necessitated the maintenance of their rural links. The

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<sup>9</sup> KOSAMBI, Meera. “British Bombay and Marathi Mumbai: Some 19<sup>th</sup> Century Perceptions”. In: PATEL, SUJATA and THORNER, Alice (eds.). *Bombay: Mosaic of Modern Culture*. Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1995, pp. 4-5.

<sup>10</sup> CHANDAVARKAR, Rajnarayan. *The Origins of Industrial Capitalism in India*. Op. Cit., p. 29.

<sup>11</sup> Maharashtra is a leading industrial state in India and Mumbai (earlier Bombay) is its capital.

persistence of rural networks led to the formation of various popular working-class institutions in the city. These institutions included *gramastha mandals* (village organizations), *krida mandals* (sports clubs), *vyayam shalas* (gymnasiums), *khanavalis* (community dining houses), and *path pedis* (credit societies). These institutions catered to the various material and cultural needs of the textile workers in the city.<sup>12</sup>

Some scholars have understood the social relationships engendered by these institutions as “pre-capitalist,” which would dissolve with deeper industrialization. The presence of these “pre-capitalist” features was also linked to workers’ commitment (or their lack of) to the factory.<sup>13</sup> However, later studies have shown that these informal institutions were an integral part of capitalist development in Bombay and a clear-cut distinction between the social organization of the neighborhoods and the workplace is untenable. The interdependent relationship between the workplace and the neighborhood was best exemplified in recruitment practices. The authority of the “jobber” (the recruiting middleman between the workers and the mill-owners) in the neighborhood was based on his/her power to negotiate with the management at the workplace. Similarly, his importance at the workplace was based on the influence among the workers in the neighborhood mediated through ethnic ties based on caste and region.<sup>14</sup> Further, the neighborhood-workplace complementarity was also important in terms of the organization of work in the industry. Extensive use of casual labour and its increased insecurity forced mill workers to maintain social connections beyond the workplace, either in the village or in the urban neighborhood. These networks were particularly vital in times of industrial conflict to generate additional resources.

It was not just the material needs of workers that constituted their neighborhood connections. Leisure and political activities contributed to the development of the “street” and neighborhood as a social arena. Workers’ patronage helped sustain a unique working-class theater in Girangaon. The mill theater has been in existence for over a century now and is associated with *tamasha*, a folk-art form of Maharashtra. The theater of Girangaon was considered as the “poorest of poor” theaters, where the playwright was often not paid and performances took place on makeshift stages during festivals

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<sup>12</sup> CHANDAVARKAR, Rajnarayan. *The Origins of Industrial Capitalism in India*. Op. Cit.

<sup>13</sup> MORRIS, M. D. *The Emergence of an Industrial Labour Force in India: A study of Bombay*. Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1965; MYERS, C. A. *Labour Problems in the industrialization of India*. Cambridge. Harvard University Press, 1958.

<sup>14</sup> CHANDAVARKAR, Rajnarayan. *The Origins of Industrial Capitalism in India*. Op. Cit.

and competitions.<sup>15</sup> The theater was not only a means of popular entertainment, but also served as a tool of political education as it engaged well with the lives of the workers. The regional content of the theater helped forge community bonds among the workers. It is believed that until the 1960s and 1970s, there were 10-12 baris (performances) of tamasha everyday in theaters such as the Hanuman Theater in the Lalbaug area in Bombay. The baris commenced in the evening as the mill workers began to trickle in after work and would go on until late in the night. It was because of these popular institutions that Girangaon derived its exclusive working-class identity in the city.

### **Exigencies on the Eve of the Strike**

The Bombay textile industry provided employment to approximately one million people in 1982. As an organized workforce, it occupied second place (15.1 per cent) after food products (16.8 per cent). In the two decades preceding the strike, the number of factories rose from 8,233 in 1961 to 16,594 in 1981. This reflected a similar rise in employment in the organized sector from nearly 800,000 to nearly 1.2 million workers during the same period. However, there was an emerging trend toward newer capital-intensive industries in terms of productive capital, which far outweighed the growth of employment in the organized sector. The productive capital of these new industries grew from Rs. 6 billion (\$ 857 million) to Rs. 700 billion (\$ 77 billion).<sup>16</sup> This fact is closely tied to the increasing relative deprivation experienced by textile workers as the wages of the workers in the new industries were more than twice that of the textile workers.

In the early 1980s, the annual average income of workers in the chemical industry was 14,367 rupees (\$1,596) compared to 7,120 rupees (\$791) for textile workers. The chemical industry contributed to nearly twenty-five per cent of the total value added in Maharashtra state, whereas its share of employment was a mere nine per cent (as compared to twenty-four per cent for the textile industry). The per capita worker output in the chemical industry was about 308,000 rupees (\$42,222) as compared to 46,000 rupees (\$5,111) in the textile industry.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> GOKHALE, Shanta. "Rich Theatre, Poor Theatre". In: *Bombay: The Mosaic of Modern Culture*. Op. Cit.

<sup>16</sup> VAN WERSCH. *The Bombay Textile Strike, 1982-83*. Op. Cit., pp. 18-19. The approximate conversion in parentheses is based on the exchange rate of the specific period discussed. One dollar was roughly equal to 7 rupees in 1961 and 9 rupees in 1981.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

The growth of capital-intensive industries also involved a shift of production to the capital-intensive power loom sector, which led to a loss of market share of the labour-intensive mills. While the overall production of cotton cloth produced in the cotton mills remained stagnant during the period 1970-1987, the production of blended cloth from the power looms kept growing since the 1970s. Even during the strike, the production of synthetic man-made fiber grew due to the decentralized power loom sector, which was unaffected by the strike.

Along with declining share of production, the technological backwardness of textile mills further aggravated the situation. The obsolescence of the machinery used in spinning, weaving, and processing has been identified as the one of the main causes of the “sickness” of the industry.<sup>18</sup> However, this technological backwardness is not new. The mill owners refused to modernize their mills forcing them to eventually close in order to redirect their investments into other profitable enterprises. In this context, the strike proved to be a blessing-in-disguise for the mill owners. Two years after the strike, the government announced a New Textile Policy (NTP) on 6 June 1985, paving the way for full-scale modernization of the industry.

The strike was called on 18 January 1982 and lasted for eighteen and half months. There were two main issues precipitating the strike. First, was the issue of bonuses and second, the disillusionment with the largely unpopular trade union—the Rashtriya Mill Mazdoor Sangh (RMMS) or the National Mill Workers Association.<sup>19</sup> As per the Bombay Industrial Relations (BIR) Act, only a recognized union (in this case the Congress-backed RMMS) could represent the interests of the textile workers.

Due to growing disillusionment with the RMMS, the textile workers approached Datta Samant, a popular trade unionist in Bombay, known for his legendary negotiating skills. Although Samant did not belong to the textile industry, his reputation as a hard bargainer in other industries

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<sup>18</sup> In India, the Sick Industrial Companies (Special Provisions) Act, 1985, commonly known as SICA was introduced to “determine sickness and expedite the revival of potentially viable units of closure of unviable units.” A company was identified as being “sick” when its “accumulated losses were equal to or more than its new worth.” In 1987, a Board for Industrial and Financial Reconstruction (BIFR) was set up to implement the provisions of SICA. Initially introduced to govern private companies, the BIFR brought public sector enterprises under its purview in 1991 after the introduction of the new industrial policy in 1991, which was part of a broader neoliberal economic reforms officially introduced in the early 1990s. For further details, see <http://www.bifr.nic.in/aboutus.htm>.

<sup>19</sup> VAN WERSCH. *The Bombay Textile Strike, 1982-83*. Op. Cit., pp. 18-19.

(particular engineering industries) convinced the workers of his effectiveness as a mediator between them and the management. With initial reluctance, Samant accepted his mediator role and formed his own union called Maharashtra Girni Kamgar Union (MGKU) or the Maharashtra Textile Workers Union in October 1981.

In the following sections, I present an empirical analysis of workers' and Girangaon residents' narratives on the strike. Their narratives must be appreciated in conjunction with the preceding historical discussion on the working-class formation in Bombay.

### **Workers' Perceptions of the Strike**

#### *Data and method*

The data for this section consists of sixteen transcribed interviews (of thirty hours duration in total) made available through the Archives of Indian Labour.<sup>20</sup> The interviews were conducted from November 1999 to December 2000.<sup>21</sup> Among the sixteen respondents, twelve were men and four women. Eleven respondents were former mill workers. Out of the remaining five, two women were wives of former mill owners and three were residents of the mill district consisting of a noted poet, a tamasha theater owner, and a rangoli artist.<sup>22</sup> The respondents were all Marathi-speaking and came from three regions of Maharashtra—Konkan, Kolhapur, and Satara. On losing their jobs after the strike, a majority of the respondents were now working in the informal economy stitching and selling garments for a garment company, tailoring, and weaving.

There are some limitations in the data used for this study. First, as I did not conduct or translate the interviews, I have no control over the errors that occurred in the process of collection and translation. Second, as the conclusions are based on only sixteen interviews, they have limited

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<sup>20</sup> The archives are part of a larger oral history collection of the V. V. Giri National Labour Institute and Association of Indian Labour Historians. I would like to thank the institute for allowing me to use the data. The data is available online on the Archive's website (<http://www.indialabourarchives.org>). I would also like to acknowledge Mr. Hemant Babu and his team of researchers for conducting, translating, and transcribing these interviews.

<sup>21</sup> Each interview was relatively unstructured in nature and lasted approximately thirty minutes each. The interviews were conducted in Marathi (the official language of the Maharashtra state) and Hindi (India's national language). The interviews were later translated and transcribed into English.

<sup>22</sup> *Tamasha* is a traditional folk art form in the state of Maharashtra and a popular form of entertainment for the textile workers in the city. *Rangoli* is another folk art form in India that involves drawing designs on the floor using colored rice, dry flour, colored sand, and flower petals.

generalizability beyond the scope of the study. However, the relevance of the study outweighs its limitations. Because the interviews are unstructured and detailed, they provide sufficient information for an interpretive analysis of the strike. Further, considering the paucity of research on subjective understanding of the strike, such a rare data set is definitely worth examining.

I used coding procedures of grounded theory as outlined by Strauss and Corbin for analyzing the interviews.<sup>23</sup> These procedures involve initial microscopic examination of the data based on open and axial coding to look for indicator-concepts, writing theoretical memos, and generating core categories through further selective coding. All the indicators, concepts, and categories generated during the coding process are highlighted by double quotes in the paper. In order to save space and to preserve the flow of the paper, I will not provide a detailed description of the coding procedures.

The process of selective coding of the interviews revealed five core categories or themes discussed by the respondents which I label as: 1) Expectations of the Strike and the Articulation of Demands, 2) Strategies of Survival During the Strike, 3) Analyzing Failure: State, Management, and the War of Attrition, 4) Loss of Livelihoods and Informalization of Work, and 5) Loss of Socio-Cultural Space. An overall graphical representation of the following analysis is presented in Figure 1 at the end of the paper.

### **1. Expectations of the Strike and the Articulation of Demands**

There were growing expectations surrounding the strike. This comes across in most of the interviews. These expectations arose out of the feelings of desperation, hopelessness, economic deprivation, and also hope instilled by past struggles. However, the feeling of desperation seems to be the most pronounced with workers feeling that there was no other option but to strike.

The interviews reveal that there were three factors that provided the context within which the expectations of the strike were created. First, the prior history of labour struggles of textile workers; second, the economic conditions on the eve of the strike and their experience of “comparative disadvantage” with regard to workers from other industries; and finally, the specific role played by the leadership of Datta Samant (see Figure 1).

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<sup>23</sup> For more details, see STRAUSS, Anselm and CORBIN, Juliet. *Basics of Qualitative Research*. London: Thousand Oaks, 1998, pp. 55-71.

It was in the textile industry that the earliest trade unions in India were formed. Due to their history of militant struggles, the Bombay textile worker was once regarded as the vanguard of the Indian labour movement. There had always been a tradition of indigenous shop-floor level organization among the workers. Even though one does not find a complete record of the total number of work stoppages that occurred in the mills, the first prolonged general strike in the Bombay textile mills took place in 1928.<sup>24</sup> The strike lasted six months. Prior to that in 1924, there had been a failed two-month strike involving the issue of a bonus. There was another work stoppage in 1925.

A peculiar feature of the textile workers in Bombay was their ability to take initiative in organizing themselves during a strike, which led to the formation of unions *during* the strike. As a quote from a famous trade unionist S. A. Dange during a court trial reveals: “The strike was not our creation, but we were the creation of the strike. An organization had not brought about the general strike of 1928, but the strike had brought forth an organization”.<sup>25</sup>

The 1982-1983 strike had similar patterns. It is argued that both the strikes were “total,” in the sense that they elicited a near complete response from the workers. During both the strikes, the mill owners categorically refused to negotiate with the strikers. In 1928, it was the communists who were very active in the strike and in 1982 it was Datta Samant.

There was an air of desperation at the time of the 1982-83 strike and the workers were prepared to pay any price for the strike. Economic hardships partly explain this desperation of the workers. There was also a widespread feeling of “comparative disadvantage” that textile workers experienced with regard to other industrial workers. One of the respondents explains that it was the textile workers who built the city economically and created the national wealth based on which other industries came into being. Some workers also felt that the oldest industrial workers in India were being discriminated against. It is in this context that the workers’ expectations towards the strike grew. One of the respondents highlights this point in his response:

Textile workers were resentful of the fact that unlike workers in other industries in the organized sector, they could not hope for an increment...Benefits that were being given to workers in other industries

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<sup>24</sup> BAKSHI, Rajni. *The Long Haul: The Bombay Textile Workers Strike of 1982-83*. Op. Cit.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

were denied to the textile workers...They [the textile workers] were the oldest workers and they were being discriminated against. Workers wanted to fight.

However, the same respondent was also skeptical of the success of the strike as their work stoppage would be countered by a shift of production to the power looms.

The strike was not an adventurous act on the part of Datta Samant. It was supported by everyone. Now I think he made a mistake in not taking into account the fact that power looms had come up all over the state, and the weaving was done there by mill owners...Even when starting the strike he should have taken note of this as the market did not suffer due to lack of cloth. The power looms were taking care of that demand.

Finally, leadership played a very important role in raising people's hopes for the strike. Dr. Datta Samant and his union MGKU played a key role in the strike. Dr. Samant did not belong to the textile industry. However, he was popular in other industries (especially the engineering industry). It was his ability to secure good compensation and settlements that drew the workers towards him. Therefore, he was considered to be a very influential trade union leader. In fact, it was the textile workers who approached him to lead the strike. The informants describe him as a "militant leader," "dynamic leader," "as someone who did things openly," and "as someone who could feel the problems of the poor." However, it was not leadership alone, but also a lack of alternate leadership that pushed the workers to look for leadership outside their industry. The workers in the mills were not happy with the recognized union in the mills, the RMMS. The BIR Act that governed the textile mills denied workers the right to affiliate with any other union than the one that was legally recognized by the textile industry. In this context, there was another rival union—Girni Kamgar Sena (GKS) or the Textile Workers Army (the trade union wing of the right-wing political party, Shiv Sena)—that was growing popular in the mill district. Some of the Konkani people workers approached the leader of the Shiv Sena Balasaheb Thackeray with their complaints as he too belonged to Konkan.<sup>26</sup> After this, the Shiv Sena started taking keener interest in the mills. However, the workers felt they were "back-stabbed" by the Sena as it isolated them at the very last minute. The Sena had called a one-day strike of the textile workers. However, the strike was called off at the last minute

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<sup>26</sup> Konkan is a coastal region in the state of Maharashtra, and also a region from where many people migrated to work in the mills of Bombay.

and the workers suspected that this was due to the economic and political nexus of the elite classes in Bombay. The disgruntled workers then approached Dr. Datta Samant to lead them. Most of the respondents describe how the workers “forced” Datta Samant to assume their leadership. In this context, one of the respondent states:

There was a meeting in which the workers brought pressure on Dr. Samant that the strike should commence right from tomorrow. Doctor was against it, but the people had decided. The workers called for a strike and Doctor was forced to take up leadership.

Workers’ zeal in urging Datta Samant to assume leadership is further highlighted by another respondent when he says:

Datta Samant had won an equally good wage hike in Empire Dyeing [a textile mill]. The workers decided that if we have to fight a decisive battle they would need a leader like Doctor Samant. So they decided to get him into the textile industry. Workers went to Dr. Samant, but he was not interested. He felt he could not be effective or solve the problem, given the BIR Act, the RMMS, the Congress government, and the mill owners and their strong nexus. But workers were adamant. They “gheraoed” [cordoned] him the whole day and night. So he had to agree.

Datta Samant had warned the workers that the strike would be a long drawn affair, however most of the respondents believed that the strike would be over “today or tomorrow.” Based on Samant’s reputation, workers shared the perception that he would deliver the goods in a short time. One respondent expresses this in the following manner:

At that time Doctor advised the workers not to go on a strike, all at once. He said the strike could go on for 4-5 years or could even take months. But the workers thought he would be effective and bring them victory, and so they rallied behind him and the strike happened. Doctor himself did not want the workers to go on strike, the workers themselves wanted to, and they did.

The strike started around the bonus issue. However, one of the respondents very articulately points out that there was much more at stake than just workers’ bonuses. He states:

The main issue was to scrap the BIR Act. That union recognition should be through elections. This was Doctor’s [Dr. Datta Samant] first demand. And then there was a demand for a wage hike of 150-250 rupees [sixteen to twenty seven dollars based on the exchange rate at that time] rupees in basic [salary]. Then there was the issue of the *badli* [contractual] workers to be made permanent.

Thus, we find that contrary to existing studies on the strike, there were multiple factors that influenced the workers to support the call for a strike. Some were immediate, having to do with the problems concerning the conditions related to organization, pay, and working conditions in the mills. However, the prior history of organized resistance in Mumbai and faith in good leadership also provided the workers the strength and hope to strike.

## 2. Strategies of Survival

Workers found it extremely difficult to survive the eighteen months of the strike (some even resorted to selling household items such as utensils to survive the strike). The union did its part in distributing food grains at the factory gate, but that was not enough. Some of the workers were forced to leave the city in search of work. Some even went to Bhiwandi (an adjacent power loom town) for work. However, the different strategies of coping employed by the workers were based on the resources available to them. The workers who migrated from the Desh region owned small amounts of land in their villages and could go back their villages. Even after the strike, the strategies of survival of the workers were based on access to resources like land and social networks, a point highlighted by most respondents. One of the woman respondents mentions:

There is a difference between the workers who came from the Konkan and those who came from western Maharashtra—from Desh. They all went back to their villages because they had land there. But we, who were from Konkan, had to stay here.

The union of Dr. Samant also tried to help the workers out of their distress. Dr. Samant started touring the rural areas garnering support for the striking workers in the form of *prabhat pheris* (morning marches). People responded by giving food grains and money. One of the respondents explains the process of distribution of bags of food grains and money:

People from western Maharashtra responded enthusiastically and thousands of bags of grain would come daily into Mumbai. This would be sent to each zone and it would be distributed from there. The other unions owing allegiance to Doctor [Samant] in Bombay collected about three crore rupees [around \$330,000] for the textile workers. This was distributed for the children, for their fees and books and also for those who fell ill, for medical expenses.

Thus, these “pre-capitalist” rural networks were extremely important means that sustained workers’ resistance during the strike.

### 3. Analyzing Failure: State, Management, and the War of Attrition

So what went wrong with the strike? One of the respondents argues, “the union that was responsible for the strike was also responsible for its failure.” The strike was initially called in eight mills. The idea was to “escalate the strike” if there was no change in the attitude of the government. However, over a period of time people realized that the demands were not been met and workers began to feel restless. It was perceived that if there was no participation from all the workers, the prospects of getting any demands were bleak. Dr. Datta Samant wanted “time to lobby,” but as the workers were growing restless he had to yield to their pressure.

There are mixed opinions as to why the strike dragged on for such a long period. None of the workers wanted nor expected the strike to last that long. Some respondents believed that the strike dragged on due to the tactics of a joint effort of the management and the government. The mill-owners did not care much about the workers and were always looking for an excuse to get rid of workers. The strike was also an opportunity to close the mills and divest the money into other lucrative businesses. Some respondents argued that the Congress government at the center and in the state saw Datta Samant as a threat to their power due to his popularity. Therefore, they refused to act on the workers’ demands.

The respondents discuss various strategies adopted by the management to break the strike. The legally recognized, but worker-estranged union RMMS, played an important part in breaking the inactivity of the workers. One of the respondents discusses how the RMMS tried to break the strike with the help of the police. The management of some mills resorted to police support in escorting workers to the mills. Moreover, the police even escorted strikebreakers to the mill gates in trucks. The management too tried to lure the workers with free food. One of the respondents informs that some workers even slept in the mills. According to him, there was no production in the mills. All that the workers would do is clean the machines and the departments. Some workers mention that the management even threatened workers with evictions from the mill residences in order to force the workers back to work. One of the workers states:

The trick used by the management was simple. They went to the quarters of the workers and told them—if you are not coming back to work get out of the chawl [working class tenement] and go where [ever] you like. The workers had no option but to go back to work. This way in each mill the owners broke the strike.

Most of the respondents believe that the first six months of the strike were “total”. No one went to work. However, they believe that “the strike was dragged on for too long” after that. The above respondent believes that the strike was prolonged due to the inability of the union to gain recognition through the BIR Act. He further shifts the blame of prolonging the strike away from Samant by explaining that he had no option but to keep the strike going and the fact that it eventually “had become a matter of prestige” for the workers.

There was also widespread “disillusionment” and “secrecy” surrounding the strike that proved detrimental to workers’ mobilization. For example, a respondent says that “[w]e did not know that the strike was to begin on January 18.” The respondent only realized that the workers of the mills were on strike when he was stopped at the gates of the mill as he went to work the next day.

The effectiveness of the strike was also blunted by the fact that there were efforts from the Congress-affiliated Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC) with the help of the government to “call people to work.” A respondent describes in detail the manner in which the workers were escorted to the mill gates under excessive police security. Thus, according to him the first major strike-break was due to the INTUC and the Congress government itself. He says:

RMSS people were sent to the villages and with the help of the local Congress leaders they started to pressurize [sic] and bribe and threaten the workers to return to the mills. State transport buses were pressed into service and the workers were brought back.

Finally, the effect of attrition began to show after the sixth month. The workers, who stayed back in the city with the hope of resuming work after meeting their demands, began to go back to their villages. Some began to seek work outside the city.

#### **4. Loss of Livelihood and Informalization of Work**

It is difficult to estimate the exact number of jobs lost due to the strike. It is believed that around 100,000 workers were affected by the strike. The government estimates are much lower. The Kotwal Committee (constituted in 1986 to assess the impact of the strike) points out that close to 51,000 workers were dismissed after the strike and around 46,000 workers had not

been paid their dues.<sup>27</sup> However, this number does not include people who either resigned, retired, or who had not been re-employed for other reasons.

The interviews provide us with details regarding the economic hardships that the workers and their families had to face after the strike. A woman employee discusses how the local businesses had been affected by the strike. She observes that the business of *khanawalis* (community dining homes) had to close down. Khanawalis was a very peculiar feature of the social life in Girangaon. Most men that migrated to Bombay in search of work in the textile mills left their families behind. They could not afford to sustain their families in the “big city.” They stayed in small rented rooms, usually ten to twelve people sharing a single room. Cooking was almost impossible in these small rooms and for this reason these dining homes were popular with the mill workers.

One of the male respondents compares the pre-and post-strike economic situation: “In those days the situation was good. They (workers) had some money to spend. It was a period that mill workers bought things even for their neighbors. All festivals were celebrated properly”.

Later the same respondent compares the above situation to the post-strike period through a very moving story:

There was an incidence of death in one of the workers’ family. But the family had no money to perform the last rites. Finally the worker sold his wife’s *mangal sutra* [necklace made of black beads symbolizing marriage] to arrange the money. People were that desperate.

The selling of the mangal sutra evokes a strong emotional response in the Indian context. In India, many Hindus consider the mangal sutra as the most visible and sacred ornament of married women. In this case, the selling of a mangal sutra highlights not only their extreme poverty, but also a sense of “personal loss” or humiliation on the part of the male worker for not being able to preserve the sanctity of marriage.

Many of the workers who lost their jobs were pushed into the informal economy. Some worked as vendors selling vegetables or flowers, while some turned to small-scale self-employed business activities such as selling *pan* (betel-nut leaves). Some women took up work as domestic help in houses. One of the women respondents survived by selling *sarees* (traditional garment worn by Indian women) door to door. These facts point to the increasing informalization of work in Bombay, following the strike. Informalization of work has far reaching consequences not only on the

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<sup>27</sup> VAN WERSCH. *The Bombay Textile Strike, 1982-83*. Op. Cit., p. 235.

living conditions of the workers, but also on their ability to organize. The traditional trade unions have either been reluctant or unable to organize such people in the informal economy, leaving the fate of such workers to the vagaries of the market.

### 5. Loss of Socio-Cultural Space

The strike also had a significant impact on working-class culture in Girangaon. This issue was linked to the transformation of the physical landscape of the mill district. A woman respondent on being asked to describe whether she observed any changes in Girangaon after the strike responds by saying, “yes, earlier there were a lot of workers. When the mill shifts got over, there used to be a lot of crowd as if it was some kind of a *padyatra* [pedestrian rally]. But now the number has reduced considerably. Not many men on this road”.

The decline in the sheer visibility of workers is a powerful metaphor of the post-industrial transformation in the city. Gone are those days where one would see crowds of workers lined up at the factory gates. Does this “non-visibility” have anything important to tell us? This is especially important in case of Mumbai, which is trying to project itself as a “global” or “world class city” by promoting the service sector at the expense of manufacturing.

The failure of the strike has also had important implications for the contemporary economic restructuring of Mumbai. In 1995, Bombay First, the think-tank of the Bombay Chamber of Commerce and Industry sanctioned McKinsey (a prominent consultancy firm) to produce a report known as the *Bombay First Report*.<sup>28</sup> The report envisions Mumbai as a “world class city” in the mould of such cities as Shanghai, Hong Kong, and Singapore. The report bears testimony to the shift in the priorities of urban policy that is now geared toward protecting the interests of the wealthy at the cost of the poor urban working classes in the city.<sup>29</sup> With a decline of the textile industry in Mumbai, there is a push to redevelop closed mills into commercial office space for new service-based industries.

The liberalization policies introduced in the early 1990s have further accelerated the process of deindustrialization and spatial re-organization of

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<sup>28</sup> Bombay First was modeled after London First, a partnership of business enterprises that promoted London as one of the leading cities of the world.

<sup>29</sup> For more details, see GHADGE, Ravi. “Globalizing Marginality: Spatial Politics of 21st Century Mumbai”. *The Journal of Interdisciplinary Policy Research and Action*. Vol. 4, n.1, 2010, pp. 54-81.

the city.<sup>30</sup> The contemporary economic restructuring of the city marginalizes the physical and cultural space of people associated with the textile industry. A tamasha theater owner highlights this point as he laments:

Now there are hardly any mills running and very few textile workers...There used to be tamashas and plays performed there, starting late in the night when workers were free from work...but now our audiences have almost become extinct. The tamasha artists are unable to survive. This artistic tradition is likely to die out.

The question of space has assumed central importance. The association of space and culture is also brought out by one of the poet-performers associated with the working-class movement in the city. He says:

Mills should not close. They are the pride of the city. They talk of utilizing open land, but why can't they remain open? Why does it bother you I want to ask them! We don't want to leave this area. We don't want money; we want to live on the land of our forefathers, our traditions. I have lived here for 63 years and my father lived here before me.

The economic losses due to the strike also resulted in familial instability, loss of children's education, and loss of prestige. One of the women respondents narrates how the lack of financial contribution to the joint family during the strike affected the relationship between the family members. She also mentions that some of the workers who faced acute financial crisis also contemplated committing suicide.

The children of the mill workers held particularly strong opinions against the strike. They considered the strike responsible for their misery. For some respondents, the fact that women were now "forced" to work outside their homes was itself a kind of humiliation. One respondent mentions that his son could not complete his education, and his wife started working. His daughter too could not be educated and was "forced" to work. The strike and the financial loss associated with it also affected the lives of the workers in other ways. According to the above respondent it became difficult for the workers to get their sons and daughters married. He says:

The textile worker gets about Rs. 4000 (about eighty dollars per month) or so, and a sweeper in a big engineering company gets almost that much! And textile workers used to be number one workers in the city. Now no one wants to give their daughters away to a textile worker or his son.

Some workers had become fatalistic toward their future. On being asked whether he had any memories associated with the strike, or any particular

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<sup>30</sup> Structural adjustment primarily implies the changing importance and role of different sectors of the economy in the process of development.

incident or event that he would like to talk about, the respondent summed it all up by saying: “We have come to the conclusion. There is no hope. That is the only memory.”

### **Conclusion**

This paper demonstrates the utility of historicizing the analysis of the Bombay Textile Strike of 1982-1983 within the broader process of working-class formation in Bombay and the specific conjuncture of the strike. It illustrates that it is inadequate to understand the strike solely on the basis of the social context of the work place. The unique historical formation of the working class in Bombay highlights the fact that a clear distinction between the working-class neighborhoods and the work place is untenable. Historically, there always existed a symbiotic relationship between the working class neighborhoods and the work place. This inter-relationship was evident in the history of recruitment of labour in Bombay, the survival of workers in the city, as well as in their ability to organize and resist the excesses of capital.

The analysis of the strike (see Figure 1) confirms the above thesis. The strike was a culmination of a number of factors. In addition to socio-economic factors, the immediate causes of the strike also included workers' perceptions about past working-class struggles and the role of leadership. The workers' strategy of survival during the strike highlights the role of rural connections of the workers, which can only be understood within the context of the particular process of migration and adaptation of the workers in the city. The rural connections of the workers helped them sustain prolonged periods of industrial unrest as most of the workers returned to their villages to await the outcome of the strike. The “totality” of the strike owed much to this. However, we also find that this “buffer zone” of rural connections was not available to some of the workers involved in the strike due to lack of adequate resources in their rural settings. I hypothesize that it is these workers that were most adversely affected by the strike. They were either forced to find alternate informal work in the city or find work outside the city. The strike had a far-reaching impact on the lives of those associated with the textile industry. The losses were not only economic. The strike and the subsequent policies of economic restructuring destabilized the working-class culture of Girangaon as the fate of these communities was intricately tied to the physical space of the neighborhoods and the mills.

Future critical studies on labour conflict in India should take a more holistic approach in understanding industrial conflict taking into account not only economic issues of the workplace, but also sociocultural factors beyond it. Further, they should also include interpretive accounts of actors (particularly workers) involved as this yields a more multi-dimensional analysis of the conflict that can help in more effective formulation of policies addressing the problems of industrial workers and their families.